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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000687

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [MARR](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: DEFMIN MURR PREDICTS HE'LL KEEP DEFENSE
IN QUICK CABINET FORMATION

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. Lebanese Minister of Defense Elias Murr told the Ambassador and Poloff June 19 he predicted the upcoming cabinet formation process would be quick. Murr believes he will remain as Defense Minister. Looking ahead, Murr said his priority was to ensure the Lebanese Armed Forces were prepared for any event. He said he preferred U.S. assistance and equipment, despite comments from presumptive PM Saad Hariri about seeking arms from Russia and others. On politics, Murr said the Hizballah-led March 8/Aoun coalition was "shocked" by the outcome of the June 7 parliamentary elections and that the Hizballah-Aoun relationship was worsening. End summary.

CABINET FORMATION
WRANGLING BEGINS

12. (C) Murr expected the Defense Ministry to retain the special status as a "sovereign" (key) ministry and that he would be asked to remain as minister. Murr reported that when he last spoke with March 14 leader and presumptive Prime Minister Saad Hariri and opposition-allied Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, both claimed that President Sleiman had told them that the Minister of Defense and Lebanese Armed Forces Commander positions were "not up for negotiation" (indicating that the President would name the Defense Minister, as he did in July 2008).

13. (C) Murr confided that he hoped Saad Hariri would become PM and believed that Hariri had already received Saudi Arabia's blessing. (Note: At the time the Ambassador saw Murr, Hariri was in the middle of a week-long visit to Saudi Arabia. Hariri is expected back in Beirut soon. End note.) Caretaker PM Fouad Siniora, he believed, remained interested in the position, and had asked Murr's opinion about who the U.S. would prefer-- Siniora or Hariri. Murr said he responded that "the U.S. would prefer both." Incumbent Minister of Interior Ziad Baroud, Murr said, was "a nice guy" and Murr reported that he and Baroud worked well together. However, Murr said he did not believe Baroud was the best

choice for that ministry.

MURR PREFERS TO
"BUY AMERICAN" FOR LAF
ARMS AND EQUIPMENT

¶4. (C) Murr requested U.S. assistance to dissuade Saad Hariri from seeking military aid from Russia for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). He said Hariri was pushing him to work with the Russians because Hariri wants "to do something quickly" and because Saudi Prince Bandar Al Sultan has a good relationship with the Russians that Hariri would like to "capitalize" on. Murr said he advised Hariri that acquiring weapons and equipment for the LAF was not only a military policy, but also a political one. He said he explained that U.S. military assistance comes with full U.S. political backing, while accepting Russian assistance would come with no political clout and was "no better than dealing with an arms dealer." The strength and capability of the LAF was his first priority, Murr continued, because the army needed to be prepared in the event a security crisis were to occur as a result of the findings of the Special Tribunal, events in Iran, or something else. The Ambassador noted that strengthening the LAF and ISF as key state institutions remain high priorities for U.S. assistance to Lebanon.

HIZBALLAH "SHOCKED"
AFTER ELECTIONS

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¶5. (C) Murr believed that Lebanon had unquestionably "succeeded" in the conduct of the elections. It was clear that the June 7 electoral results showed that the Christian population had sided with the March 14 coalition and had voted against Hizballah's Christian ally, Michel Aoun, he declared. Hizballah was "shocked" that its coalition had not gained more seats, despite having outlined a complete list of priorities and programs for Lebanon during the campaign, Murr assessed. He believed that the electoral alliance between Hizballah and Aoun was worsening because Hizballah had counted on Aoun to provide political cover for Hizballah's arms, but instead Hizballah would now have to carry Aoun.

¶6. (C) Hizballah, Murr said, would face three major problems in the near term. The most important and most dangerous, he analyzed, would be an Iranian regime with nuclear weapons and the Israeli response it. Hizballah also worried about the outcomes from the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, as well as how its weapons were dealt with during future National Dialogue sessions, Murr said.

¶7. (C) Murr predicted tha Aoun and the opposition would lose an additional two to three Christian parliamentary seats -- and increase the majority's numbers at the same time -- in the Metn district after challenges were filed with the Constitutional Court, the judicial entity charged with adjudicating election cases. (Note: Family loyalty may color Elias Murr's comment; the challenges are being filed by his father, Michel Murr, who claims to have evidence of forged identity cards and other irregularities. End Note.) Elias Murr was optimistic that the results of these seats would be overturned and cited precedents from previous elections in 1996 (six cases), 2000 (five to six cases), and in 2002 (one case) in which the Constitutional Court had made similar rulings.

¶8. (C) Looking ahead, Murr believed the new majority's focus should be on the next electoral law and keeping Hizballah, Aoun, and Aoun's party from succeeding in the 2010 municipal elections. On electoral reform, Murr said he believed "one man, one vote" was preferable to proportional representation because confessional allegiance would still naturally filter through such a system.

19. (C) When asked his opinion about the time required for the cabinet formation, Murr predicted that the process would go quickly. However, he expressed concern that negotiations could get bogged down when/if the March 14 coalition objects to satisfying opposition Christian leader Michel Aoun's demands to place his allies in a certain number of cabinet seats, especially reserving a position for Aoun's son-in-law and incumbent Minister of Telecommunications Gebran Bassil. Murr said he was resigned to the fact that March 14 would probably have to accommodate Bassil to avoid creating a "bad image," but he was adamant that Bassil should not return as Telecom minister. Bassil had not been reliable when Murr and the LAF had needed Telecommunications Ministry assistance to achieve certain counterterrorism objectives, Murr said, although he had become better. Murr informed the Ambassador also that his father, Metn powerbroker Michel Murr, had been asked by Hariri to the largely ceremonial position of Deputy Speaker of Parliament. Elias said he advised his father to turn down the position because he believed that Hariri was "playing a game" to somehow sideline Elias. (Note: Elias may be hoping to return as Deputy Prime Minister -- a traditional Greek Orthodox post -- a position he has held in the past. End Note.)

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